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Author: Hanna Komorowska

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ISSUES IN EDUCATIONAL EVALUATION: EVALUATING SMALL SCALE PROJECTS

Hanna Komorowska

The aim of the present article is to analyze similarities and differences between research and evaluation, present educational evaluation in a historical perspective, offer a typology of educational evaluation, outline new needs in the field of FLT evaluation and formulate conclusions in the form of user-friendly checklists for the evaluation of small-scale projects.

1. RESEARCH AND EVALUATION — SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

As early as 40 years ago, it became clear that evaluation differs from typical educational research in “its orientation to a specific programme rather than to variables common to many programmes — as a bonus it might offer generalisation” (STAKE, 1967: 5). This meant that the experimental paradigm was no longer considered the *sine qua non* requirement for educational research projects, as had been the case until that time (CRONBACH, 1980; HOUSE, 1980). The reason for this shift resulted from the need for short-term orientation towards improvement in particular educational institutions rather than for long-term fundamental research (CRONBACH, 1982) and resulted in a detailed analysis of evaluation procedures in ELT which started in the 1980s (BERETTA, 1986) and fully developed in the 1990s (SCRIVEN, 1991; REA-DICKENS and GERMAINE, 1992; WEIR and ROBERTS, 1994).

Similarities and differences between academic research and evaluation studies were usually analysed according to several categories, i.e. audience, purpose, variables, preferred methods, criteria used, time frame and object or product (PATTON, 1981; BERETTA and DAVIES, 1985). Sometimes, especially in the 1990s, a comparison of both types with diagnostic studies was also added (WEIR and ROBERTS, 1994). In the writings of those and other methodologists research is usually defined as an explanatory procedure undertaken to address the academic community with a purpose to test hypotheses in a quantitative manner in order to contribute to scientific knowledge. It is, therefore, seen as springing from cognitive curiosity, its aim is perceived as arriving at truth-value statements and its practical application is not considered immediate.

Evaluation, on the other hand, is usually treated as a procedure addressed at administrative bodies with a purpose to describe the state of affairs in order to assess a given solution according to values adopted. It is, therefore, seen as springing from practical needs, its aim is perceived as help in administrative decision-making and its practical application is expected to be immediate. Popular views on evaluation have always concentrated on its demand-driven rather than academic, theoretical problem-solving-oriented character as well as on a more surface than in-depth view of mechanisms at work, which — together with the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods — have often been considered the risks and dangers of evaluation (DAVIDSON, 2004; KOMOROWSKA, 2005).

In most cases evaluation is restricted to “activities which

- systematically collect information,
- about the context, activities, characteristics and outcomes of individual programmes,
- for the use by specific people,
- to make specific decisions,
- with regard to what these programmes are doing, and who they are affecting” (MACKAY, 1994: 142).

It soon became obvious that, although evaluation and research differ in purpose, they are not distinct fields if we look at research techniques employed and that in every kind of research quantitative and qualitative data are now combined and various sources of data are utilized (REID, 1995).

2. EVALUATION — A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Four stages are usually distinguished in the history of evaluation:

- stage I when evaluation was identified with measuring educational attainment and comparing it with the educational objectives set at the beginning of the programme according to the classical Tylerian model,

- stage II when evaluation was used as a method of upgrading curricula,
- stage III when evaluation was used in its explanatory function,
- stage IV when evaluation was reshaped according to the constructivist paradigm (GUBA and LINCOLN, 1989).

Ralph Tyler's model, typical of stage I development in the 1950s (TYLER, 1949), fulfilled an evaluative and labelling function, accepting or rejecting particular educational programmes and ascribing values to those which had been approved. Therefore, by definition, stage I evaluation was an ex-post procedure.

Cronbach's course improvement model (CRONBACH, 1963), typical of stage II development of the 1960s, was born out of the need to upgrade existing programmes, whatever their value, and as such was future-oriented. In order to fulfil this function it had to operate on curricula and programmes in progress.

Scriven's model (SCRIVEN, 1973), which paved the way for stage III evaluation of the late 1970s, strived to bring evaluation procedures closer to research objectives and introduced the so-called goal-free evaluation aiming at explanation and interpretation of phenomena under evaluation. For that reason qualitative rather than quantitative methods were promoted, evaluation, however, retained its "programme in progress" status.

Stage IV, seen as an embodiment of social constructivist assumptions, calls for openness, interaction and negotiation between evaluators and participants of the educational programme as well as for full information being available for all the educational stake-holders — a new approach breaking away from the tradition of evaluation procedures hidden from the eyes of the public (GUBA and LINCOLN, 1981, 1989; HOUSE, 1980). In a way, the goal of stage IV evaluation is close to earlier attempts at course improvement through evaluation procedures of stage II, methods, however, are now different as both qualitative and quantitative procedures can be used, self-assessment is encouraged and triangulation in research methodology is promoted.

3. TYPES OF EVALUATION

Six categories of evaluation approaches are typically distinguished according to their orientation:

- a) objective-oriented approaches which focus on goals achieved,
- b) management-oriented approaches which focus on informing decision-makers,
- c) consumer-oriented approaches which focus on informing potential users or customers,
- d) expertise-oriented approaches which focus on applying expertise to assess the quality of programmes,

e) adversary-oriented approaches which focus on deciding which of the opposite views of evaluators is correct,

f) naturalistic and participant-oriented approaches which focus on the values and needs of participants to assess the programme or project (WORTHEN and SANDERS, 1987).

An even more important categorization, however, seems to be based on reasons for evaluation. Reasons for evaluation are numerous, but only two of them seem to have been crucial from the point of view of methodology employed and the criteria used. These were:

- extrinsically motivated evaluation, conceived and designed at administrative levels,
- intrinsically motivated evaluation, conceived and designed at programme or project levels (MACKAY, 1994).

Evaluation methodology throughout its first stage, i.e. up to the end of the 1950s, aimed mainly at product-oriented assessment. Summative evaluation, therefore, was predominant and end-of-project, diagnostic measures were used to guarantee its validity and reliability. This kind of evaluation was externally motivated and externally conducted, and thus displayed all the characteristic features of a top down, vertical hierarchy of power and status. The situation changed with process-oriented approaches typical of learner-centered, communicative methodology. Formative evaluation gained popularity and qualitative methods of data collection started to be used alongside with, or even instead of, quantitative ones in the second stage in the history of evaluation, i.e. in the 1960s. In consequence, evaluation procedures, due to feedback received, helped refocus ongoing projects and programmes, encouraged changes in evolving objectives and in recommended procedures of attaining aims. It encouraged evaluators to participate in the designing and running of the project itself, thus paving the way for a new type of evaluation, i.e. for process and participatory evaluation of stage IV (MORROW and SCHOCKER, 1993; MACKAY, WELLESLEY and BAZERGAN, 1995). In this way evaluation became, so to speak, part of what was to be evaluated and the distinction between intrinsically and extrinsically motivated evaluation was blurred. Today evaluation is often seen as collaborative effort — in line with the social constructivist paradigm.

4. NEW NEEDS IN THE FIELD OF EVALUATION

Nowadays the situation has become even more complex. More and more often do decision-makers need to prioritise projects in order to select those they finally agree to finance. Evaluation which formerly took place either when the

programme was still running or after it has ended has now been shifted to pre-planning stages of the project. Moreover, it is often based on the assessment of the ability of project designers to self-evaluate both in formative and in summative paradigms.

Not only is the distinction between externally and internally motivated evaluation blurred now, but the most important part of evaluation — that which calls the project to life by offering funds to start it, run it and complete it — is shifted in time to stages preceding what is to be evaluated. Evaluation, therefore, becomes a prognostic activity without getting rid of its formative and summative obligations. Even though methods and techniques worked out and tested in the past maintain their value and usefulness, it seems indispensable to think of criteria that would give the new, prognostic function of evaluation a more solid foundation than fortune-telling.

The new need is especially conspicuous at lower levels of educational administration or in self-governing boards which have to analyse grant proposals as well as at the stage of selecting projects to be awarded (MUREŞAN et al., 2003; HEYWORTH, 2007). What is, therefore, badly needed is some form of help for decision-makers in the process of:

- identifying small scale school or classroom projects to be supported,
 - evaluating and prioritising projects to be awarded,
- and at the same time some form of help for the authors and designers in the process of:
- preparing small scale projects in a way that would make them more successful in introducing and promoting certain educational solutions as well as in obtaining funds for the purpose.

To achieve this goal we will try to provide:

- a minimum set of criteria to be met by projects to be supported,
- an additional set of desired criteria to help evaluate and prioritise projects,
- a self-help checklist for authors of projects.

Procedures used below for this purpose will entail:

- pooling in existing sets of criteria for European Union programmes such as *Socrates*, *Leonardo*, *European Language Label* and *e-Twinning*,
- conducting an analysis of the sets with the end to identify:
 - criteria irrelevant to small-scale projects,
 - criteria to be met by all small-scale projects,
 - criteria to be met by some of the small-scale projects,
- defining needs in order to identify new criteria, specifically important for small-scale projects, to be added to the existing set,
- analysing reflection and self-assessment instruments in ELT, such as the *European Language Portfolio (ELP)* for language skills and the *European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL)* for didactic skills in

order to look at self-assessment skills as developed through instruments available to teachers,

— translating sets of criteria into *CAN DO* statements.

The following useful tips have so far been formulated for small-scale programme/project reviews.

5. CONCLUSIONS

A user-friendly list of strengths and advantages of programme/project reviews was published by Mackay and states that “undertaking a programme-project-based review will enable project personnel to:

- determine how well the project is performing in relation to its aims,
- identify strengths on which to build,
- identify areas which put the sustainability of the project at risk and which therefore demand attention,
- identify other areas of concern requiring improvement,
- identify priorities for subsequent action,
- report the project performance to appropriate bodies such as funders, host government, host institution, etc.,
- provide the funder and beneficiary with valuable information on which to base decisions, e.g. targeting resources,
- answer questions concerning accountability of the project posed by other interest groups/principal stakeholders,
- detect improvements in project performance since the previous review,
- contribute to the identification of staff development needs” (MACKAY, 1994).

A ten point user-friendly checklist for authors of small-scale projects prepared by the author of the present paper is the following:

1. Have goals been clearly identified?
2. Have goals been justified?
3. Are goals tangible?
4. Has earlier work that could prove useful for the project been identified?
5. What are the strengths of the project?
6. Is the project transferable to other contexts?
7. What are the threats to implementation?
8. What are the threats to sustainability?
9. What are the threats to transferability?
10. Does the action plan precisely list what procedures to undertake and in what order?

The checklist above can also be used as an instrument for screening and prioritizing small scale projects by external evaluators who take financial or administrative decisions related to the inclusion of projects into the framework of larger programmes. Further work leading to the identification of criteria to be met by various kinds of projects is urgently needed.

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